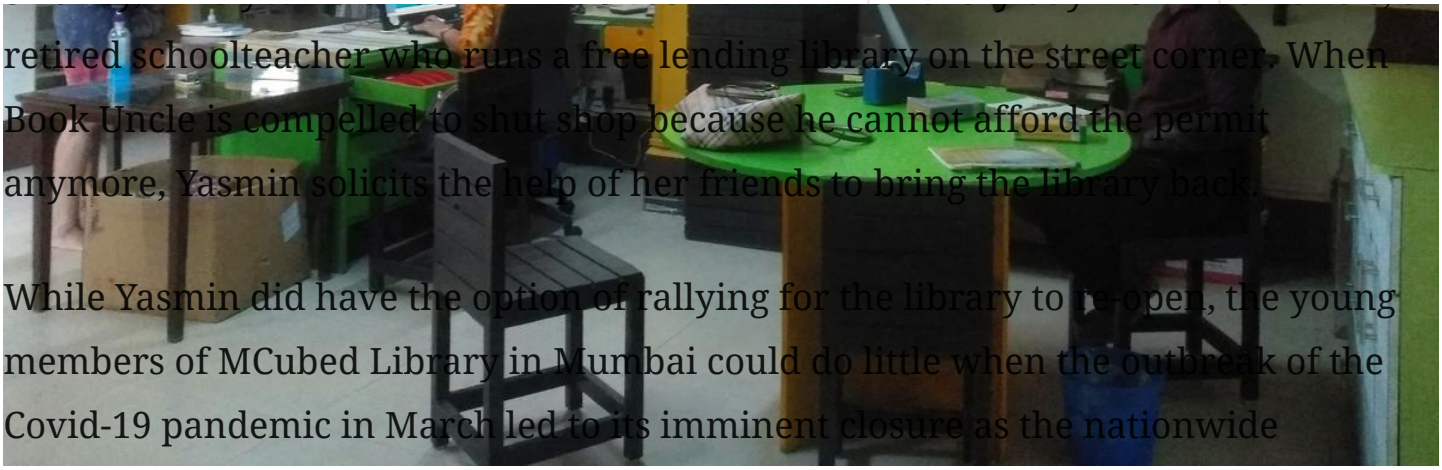
Monday, February 27th 2023

PUBLISHING AND THE PANDEMIC

How a community library in Mumbai dependent on generosity and goodwill is coping with the pandemic

The library has both initiated and benefited from the participation of neighbours and others.

Khorshed Deboo
Nov 29, 2020 · 08:30 am



retired schoolteacher who runs a free lending library on the street corner. When Book Uncle is compelled to shut shop because he cannot afford the permit anymore, Yasmin solicits the help of her friends to bring the library back.

While Yasmin did have the option of rallying for the library to re-open, the young members of MCubed Library in Mumbai could do little when the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in March led to its imminent closure as the nationwide lockdown was subsequently imposed.

ADVERTISEMENT

“We received so many phone calls from both children and parents during the lockdown, inquiring when we would re-open,” said Reeta Gupta, who has been managing the library since 2017, from behind her mask. “Children told me they missed coming to the library, that they were longing to meet their friends – it was all very overwhelming.”

space cleaned, every book was disinfected."

Early days

Located in a leafy lane near D'Monte Park in the suburb of Bandra, MCubed Library turned nine on September 30. Initially established as a library for children aged upto 16, it began stocking books for adults from 2012. While building a local library where every child would have access was a long-awaited dream of Vibha Kamat's, a 55-year-old French teacher from the neighbourhood, MCubed's beginnings were almost fortuitous.

It was a trip to California in the summer of 2004 that sparked Kamat's vision. "My nephew Neel, then six years old, had managed to read over 160 books in two months," she told me. "Every year his local library would encourage the children to pledge to read a certain number of books during their vacation. This got me thinking – why couldn't we have more children like Neel in India? Why was the idea of a local library, one that could be accessible by all, and where one could just walk to, not explored?"

ADVERTISEMENT

Back in Mumbai, Kamat began scouting for places to set up a library, but the plan did not materialise immediately. “The places I saw were largely old houses in Bandra; most of them were locked up and unoccupied, and in such cases, tenancy is always a problem,” she said. “On one of my morning walks in 2011, I came across the Maharashtra Mitra Mandal space which housed a public library. It was in a shambles – a lone man sitting at the entrance with his legs propped up on the table, a few dusty shelves, books in a state of disrepair, and a bunch of newspapers strewn around.

“The only sign of daily activity was when an old lady, a certain Mrs D’Souza, would drop by to read the papers. I then contacted the authorities and they were willing to let out the space. The only caveat – we were to refurbish it and run it on our own, on a completely voluntary basis. While the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation owns the space, we don’t receive any money from them.”

Kamat, along with two of her friends – Vaishali Shinde, a disaster management expert who worked with NGOs, and Sonal Bimal, an apparel consultant – took a leap of faith. They also gathered able support from willing and like-minded people.

Come one, come all

ADVERTISEMENT

“Our community of readers and well-wishers just opened their hearts – they gave us not only books but also furniture, shelves, a computer and printer,” Kamat told me. Donations poured in from all over the country, and from faraway London too. One of her friends got them the entire set of Asterix comics, and another offered help to set up the space.

“Before the pandemic, we also had children coming in to help arrange the books or cover them, after which we would give them a certificate as a way to appreciate their effort,” said Kamat. “An architect-friend, Rinka D’Monte, designed the lamps that adorn the library. The chaise lounge and cupboards came from some friends. Jennifer and Saeed Mirza – also close friends – donated what is now the librarian’s table.”

MCubed has managed to cultivate a symbiotic relationship with the neighbourhood. Its premises are used as a study centre by the underprivileged

The membership fees have remained unchanged since 2011. While the Galaxy, Sun, and Moon memberships are paid models, the Comet membership is a blessing in disguise for children from a modest background. “For instance, if you want your driver’s child to enrol, you can become a sponsor for that child, like a guardian,” explained Gupta. “As a guardian, one doesn’t pay any fee, it’s only so that we can contact you in case a book is misplaced or if we want to understand why the child is not turning up at the library.”

ADVERTISEMENT

Volunteers have been one of the bastions of the library since it opened its doors. Veena Marthandam, an elderly woman who used to manage the now-shuttered Danai bookshop in Khar, helps out at MCubed in every way possible. After her retirement, she began to volunteer with the library, to help classify books. She also teaches English to children from the Andrean Social Service group. “Veena is indispensible to the library,” Kamat told me. While the children from the group have painted the Warli drawings on the pillars of the rooms, a playful mural at the reception was made by yet another “friend of the library”.

Charles de Souza, a local resident with a deep interest in libraries came on board, offering to design the software without charging a rupee. “In fact, when we re-opened in July during the lockdown, several alterations had to be made to the system as the fee for members was waived for the period the library was shut,” Gupta told me. “Charles willingly helped us out with it all.”

Suresh Kare of Indoco Remedies wanted to know how he could be of help. “We requested him if he could donate a small amount towards the purchase of a projector so that we could have film screenings,” said Kamat. “He not only donated the projector but a screen and a DVD player as well! We were absolutely overwhelmed by the gesture.”

ADVERTISEMENT

Before the pandemic struck, MCubed used to host monthly movie screenings, separately for children and adults. “It’s a different experience to watch a film with your friends, perched comfortably on cushions and mats,” Gupta said. “Members were encouraged to bring their friends along as well.”

for the names of books they had enjoyed while growing up. "We also have books that are steeped in the ideas of the neighbourhood and immediate community, like something interesting about Bandra," said Kamat.

It seemed right to have the latest award-winning books too, to meet the demand for Booker-nominated titles or the JCB Prize winner, for instance. "We regularly ask our members about the books they'd like to read, and depending upon their response, we purchase those titles," Kamat added.

Before the pandemic hit, the library performed reasonably well financially. "We have two librarians, Philomena and Oliver, and two assistant librarians – who work in shifts – a person to clean the space, a gardener, and myself," said Gupta. Since a large chunk of the books are received as donations, Kamat goes through each of them to ascertain if it can be stored at the library. The assistant librarian then assesses the book for its condition. The books are colour-coded and classified age-wise, then further classified into fiction, non-fiction, poetry, reference books and so on.

ADVERTISEMENT

Horowitz, Amrita Pritam, Bertolt Brecht, Daya Pawar and Kishori Amonkar in between.

There are issues of *Sanctuary* magazine, a stack of the quintessential yellow spine belonging to *National Geographic,* an envious set of past editions of *Granta*, picture books on colours and shapes, and a gigantic Oxford English Dictionary. There's Pu La Deshpande, Sohaila Abdulali, Atul Gawande, Girish Karnad, Katie Bagli and Bhisham Sahni, and dailies and periodicals are updated regularly.

While a community of readers would undoubtedly thrive in the midst of such a diverse, mottled collection, MCubed goes beyond the ambit of reading, attempting to nurture a sense of discovery and curiosity among children. Prior to the lockdown, the library used to conduct a number of workshops and storytelling sessions.

"Since we've never really advertised, one of the ways to make more people aware of the library was through word of mouth, and this would be met with much success when we hosted puppet-shows, and read-aloud sessions, invited authors and poets for talks, and even held sessions that repel the fear of mathematics," said Gupta. "We send out emails to our members, who are then free to tell other people. Some workshops might have a nominal fee, and while we do give preference to members, we don't refuse anybody." said Gupta. For each workshop, a few seats are reserved for those from a modest background, who can join without paying a fee.

ADVERTISEMENT

Show of spine

With the pandemic showing little signs of abating soon, it will be a while before such interactive programmes are resumed. There is no doubt that it is a shared environment that ignites a young mind's imagination – where fables of prehistoric giants and chimeric creatures are narrated, rhymes on furred and feathered friends are read aloud, and stories of trees that talk and frogs that fly are exchanged.

Moreover, tales where characters that are anthropomorphised are enacted – the kind a child can seek delight in and learn empathy from. The flurry of activity coming to a standstill, however, hasn't deterred Kamat and Gupta. "One of the ways we try to keep our community of young readers engaged is through storytelling sessions held every Tuesday via Zoom," said Gupta. "The mothers take turns to tell stories, and all the kids tune in."

The first few weeks of the lockdown were mired in apprehension. Gupta said, "We had to quickly find ways to stay connected with our members, and keep them connected with each other." With no access to the library until July, reading habits had begun to alter. Most readers pivoted towards e-books and audiobooks, some joined online book clubs, striking new friendships in the bargain, and some finally got down to reading their ever-increasing, untouched stacks of books hoarded over the years.

The library continued its online engagement with Thursday Treats – sending out a poem every week to its members over email. The poem – usually an uplifting one – would be accompanied by a short write-up and an analysis. "We also had

ADVERTISEMENT

Tightrope walk

When I visited the library on a weekday afternoon in November, it was quiet save for the whirring of the fan and Philomena D'Souza, the librarian, patiently answering queries from members over the phone. The space is inviting even before you set foot – areca palm and *champa* flowers fill up the compound, animated pop-up figurines dot the colourful walls at the entrance. Gradually, a steady stream of members trickles in.

What would have been an otherwise unhurried hour or more spent browsing at leisure, deciding which books to take home, and in the process, running into friends from the neighbourhood, is now significantly altered. They adhere to new regulations – watchful of the green crosses on the floor to maintain distance, exchanging polite smiles from behind masks. As MCubed currently discourages children below the age of ten years from visiting, parents make a quick dash to pick up books for their kids.

The reopening of the library raised both hopes and hackles. While members could not wait to go back and borrow books, they had to err on the side of caution. Some

When I asked her about the financially challenges, she said warily, “There was definitely a slump when we re-opened, but we’ve picked up slowly. One of our staff members fell ill last week and since we didn’t want to take any risks, we got him tested and shut the library for a few days. Moreover, these are uncertain times, and hence also difficult for us to approach people for donations. Everybody’s been hit as far as finances are concerned.”

ADVERTISEMENT

The pandemic, however, hasn’t dissuaded people from donating books. “We did receive a few requests but had to politely turn them down as we currently are unable to manage the disinfection process for a whole new lot of books,” explained Kamat.

To minimise contact between the members and the staff, the library has set up a drop-box where members can call out numbers of the books to be returned, and ask for the books they want to borrow. While they do have the option of browsing, all the titles are catalogued on the library’s website. “The librarian, with the help of

members who are old and live alone so we were toying with the idea of sending books to them via a delivery agent," said Gupta. "If they live close by, our assistant librarian can simply go drop them off."

Do the less fortunate members of society keep returning to the library now? This is a battle that Kamat is still fighting. "Let me be honest, it is something I am yet to figure out," she said. "I would rather give them a chance again and again to come in and read instead of compelling them."

ADVERTISEMENT

Age no bar

MCubed is also where friendships are reinforced and support networks are built. For senior citizens, it is a means to stave off isolation and loneliness, interact with those from other age groups, or volunteer and feel useful. For those looking to fill unstructured time, it is a robust community of compatible individuals.

Back in 1999, Bandra residents Ernest Fernandes and Neela D'Souza came together to form the Last Sunday of the Month group for those over the age of 18. The two octogenarians select a topic and begin a discussion around it. While different

said. “One of my friends texted me how, in Scandinavia, people who have gone through trying phases in their lives share their experiences with others as a means to keep their spirits up during tough times.”

For a library that had humble, hopeful beginnings, MCubed has been at both the giving and receiving ends of capacious bounteousness. Said Kamat, “An enormous amount of goodwill and care has gone into making and building the library. It is extremely heartwarming – it cures you of any sort of cynicism that one might have in these times, reaffirming your faith in people. Friends and strangers have been very spontaneous with their generosity, and unexpectedly so, even when we did not ask them for help!”

This series of articles on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on publishing is curated by Kanishka Gupta.

Become a Scroll Member and get access to new and improved editorial products, features and services – including newsletters, podcasts and invite-only events.

PICK AN AMOUNT

₹1,000 ₹5,000 ₹10,000 ₹25,000 Other

No ads
Members-only events
Merchandise
Evening Edition newsletter
Weekly Edition newsletter

Continue to payment